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Review Article:
Defending Orthodox Christology

Frederik Herzberg

David S. Nah: *Christian Theology and Religious Pluralism: A Critical Evaluation of John Hick,* Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, ISBN 978-1-60899-768-8, Pb pp 242

'Is there just one true religion? Did Jesus really claim to be God? Is the traditional notion of a "God-Man" a contradiction in terms?' There is no need to stress that these questions are not just of import to academic theology; they touch upon the very foundation of the Christian Faith. The late Professor John Hick (1922–2012), once an orthodox evangelical Presbyterian minister according to his 2003 *Autobiography*, has gained fame by arguing, over the course of his immensely productive and successful academic career, for negative answers to the above questions—in stark contrast, of course, to all major currents of the Christian tradition. The book under review, *Christian Theology and Religious Pluralism: A Critical Evaluation of John Hick,* is based on the author's doctoral dissertation at Claremont Graduate University and engages in a critical discussion of Hick's mature theology of religious pluralism.

Before discussing Dr Nah's criticism thereof, I shall first give a short summary of Hick's position and reasoning as it is presented by Nah. To be sure, Nah's discussion of Hick's views seems fair and accurate to me, and apparently Hick did get to see some of this work (based on Nah's thesis), Nah being his student. However, I would prefer not to take a stance about the adequacy of Nah's presentation as I am not a Hick scholar. Rather, I will briefly comment, at the end of this survey, on some philosophical and historico-theological points that might be taken into account when reading Nah's monograph.

Hick's 'positive' contribution, having gone through several stages, but fully developed in his most mature writings (*The Myth of God Incarnate*, 1993; *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 1995; *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 1996), consists of a theology of religious pluralism according to which none of the various world religions has a privileged understanding of ultimate reality. Some may be more or less conducive to salvation, which Hick in his late work defines as overcoming self-centeredness, but humanity lacks sufficient data and objective criteria to actually make such comparisons in any concrete instance. Nor is it possible, according to Hick, for human beings to make any comparative judgement among the competing truth claims of the world's religions, if understood literally. They simply lack epistemic justification.

Applied to the Christian claim of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, Hick cites New Testament scholars from the very liberal end of the theological spectrum to cast doubt on the New Testament's assertion that

Jesus claimed divinity for himself and instead reduces the dogma of the incarnation to an invention of the early church which is at best metaphorical.

Hick proposes to interpret the religious traditions of the world in a non-literal, Bultmannian mythological way. This, in turn, permits—what might be called—an alethic latitude in approaching the world's religions and thereby a comprehensive reconciliation without privileging any particular faith. For example, on Hick's account, Jesus is only an incarnation of God in so far as he consistently walked in God's presence and allowed others to experience God through him; however, such a weak notion of incarnation, can according to Hick, be applied also to other great religious figures of human history, such as Buddha or Mohammed!

In addition to his historical claim that Jesus never claimed divinity for himself, Hick also raises a conceptual objection to traditional Christianity: He rejects the orthodox Christological dogma of the incarnation of God in Christ the God-Man with two natures (promulgated in the second article of the Nicene Creed and expounded by the Chalcedonian symbol) on the grounds that none of the explications given to it seems convincing to him. In particular, he dismisses Thomas Morris' Christology along with the kenotic theories of Thomasius, Stephen Davis and Frank Weston as incoherent.

Nah's 'critical evaluation of John Hick' is, as already highlighted by Professor James F. Lewis in his recommendation to the publisher, indeed very irenic in tone. This evaluation proceeds along the following stages: The first chapter discusses the soteriological position of pluralism and the prominent role John Hick has played in elaborating it. Following Hick, Nah introduces religious *pluralism* as one more (probably final and decisive) step away from the traditional soteriological *exclusivism*, the doctrine expressed in St Cyprian's dictum, *nulla salus extra Ecclesiam*, and in that sense a further development on soteriological *inclusivism* (e.g. Rahner's view that the Holy Spirit might illuminate people who never heard the name of Christ to accept essentials of the Christian faith and thus become 'anonymous Christians').

For the mature Hick, of course, inclusivism is just a mere 'epicycle', a provisional and (by dialectical historical necessity) merely temporary compromise devised to avoid the 'Copernican revolution' of removing Christ from the centre of discourse on the world's religions. Inclusivism, on Hick's account, thus ultimately needs to be overcome. It is quite helpful that Nah includes a brief intellectual vita of John Hick, which shows that such a movement from exclusivism via inclusivism to pluralism is biographically reflected by John Hick himself: He went through several intermediate stages before he arrived at his final pluralist position.

The second chapter presents John Hick's philosophical presuppositions, especially his epistemology and ontology of religion. Hick's epistemology draws firstly upon the Kantian distinction of *phenomenon* (a thing as it appears) and *noumenon* (a thing in itself), the latter being fundamentally inaccessible, and secondly upon an extremely narrow Cartesian-like conception of knowledge. Applied to God, Hick sees the various world religions as mere phenomenal responses to an unknown numinous *noumenon*. As a corollary,

there can be no absolutely and objectively reliable revelation. Not even 'revelation as history' (Pannenberg) can be reliable because according to strict Cartesian standards, we cannot know anything about the past with certainty.

Concerning ontology, Hick no longer refers to God in order to avoid a theistic (let alone monotheistic) conceptual bias, but merely to the Real. This ultimate Reality has been captured mythologically by the various religions of the world, and salvation means being transformed by the ultimate Reality into a life that is no longer self-centred—and can be reached through all of the world's faith traditions, even though they might not be all equally effective at this.

Nah questions this assumption by pointing out the extreme diversity of the world's religions, in terms of their theology (in the narrow sense of the word), their anthropology and their soteriology. Quoting Keith Ward, Nah reminds us that there are traditions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, that deny the existence of any transcendent, absolute Being. Quoting Harold Netland and William J. Wainwright, he points out the utter implausibility of treating all concepts of salvation in the world's religion as the 'transition from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness' (explicitly, Netland mentions Pauline justification, Hindu *moshka* and Zen *satori*).

In the third chapter, Nah presents an account of Hick's theology of religious pluralism. As Hick's philosophical presuppositions rule out the orthodox Christian Faith (in the sense of *fides quae*) as divinely revealed Truth, it is not surprising that he finds himself at odds with church dogma. Instead Hick subsumes his theological stance under liberal Christianity and in particular in the tradition of Reimarus and his followers. He rejects most of the New Testament as written by church theologians who, many decades after Jesus' earthly ministry, in a Feuerbachian projection imposed their own views, hopes and speculations upon the historical figure of Jesus and thereby created most of Jesus' testimonies, sermons and parables, including all those in which Jesus makes implicit claims of divinity for himself.

Assuming the historical priority of St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (at least in its earliest layers such as the confession of 1Cor 15:3–8) over the earliest layers of the post-Easter accounts in the canonical Gospels, he claims that the early church went to ever greater lengths in turning mere ecstatic experiences of appearances of the resurrected Jesus into claims about an objective bodily resurrection. The 'deification process' for Jesus went through several stages, according to Hick, and Jesus' divine sonship was first of all a honorific title that then went on to evolve into adoptionism and ultimately Nicene trinitarianism. (Nah makes a convincing case against this reasoning of Hick, as we shall see presently, in the fifth chapter.)

In the same third chapter, we also learn about Hick's arguments against Chalcedonian Christology. Hick explicitly rejects several promising candidates for explicating the Chalcedonian dogma: the two-minds theory of Thomas Morris (which draws upon concepts from contemporary psychology, in particular Marvin Minsky's *society of mind* theory) as well as the Christological (kenotic) theories of Thomasius, Davis,

and Weston. Hick also attributes antisemitism, patriarchalism and Christian arrogance to the incarnational dogma. Moreover, Hick vigorously criticises the doctrine of the atonement. Hick's own position is that we should view the incarnation as a metaphor and that there have been multiple incarnations, metaphorically understood. Echoing an idea already expressed by Troeltsch, Hick thinks that Christ is the supreme Lord for Christians, but not necessarily for others.

Hick's criticism of the doctrine of atonement, as presented by Nah, is unconvincing. He enlists the support of the Eastern church in his rejection of that doctrine and giving preference to a transformational soteriology (*theosis*). But then it is one of the most eminent contemporary philosophical theologians of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Richard Swinburne, whom he attacks for his exposition of that dogma. Moreover, Hick's criticism directed towards Swinburne seems to involve a *petitio principii*: Hick rejects Swinburne's explication due to its invocation of the idea of a personal God; however, the notion of a personal God becomes problematic only if one already has established—rather than seeking to argue for—the inadequacy of the incarnational dogma.

The fifth chapter provides a detailed analysis and ultimate refutation of Hick's historical arguments against the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nah points to Hick's relatively narrow reception of New Testament scholarship which takes into account only very sceptical positions and ignores the more recent scholarship, including what has become known as the Third Quest for the historical Jesus. Moreover, an assessment of Jesus' self-understanding has to take into account the fact that at his time, when Jews referred to God, they meant the Father in Heaven. We should therefore not be surprised if Jesus did not make claims to divinity that are as explicit as the Nicene definition. However, even many critical scholars do accept the testimony of the New Testament concerning implicit claims by Jesus to divinity. Under the double pressure of having to rebut heresies as well as the responsibility to explain the Faith to inquirers (1 Peter 3:15), the church simply made explicit what Jesus taught implicitly (Michael Ramsey, Gerald O'Collins).

In conversation with more critical scholars such as E.P. Sanders and Edward Schillebeeckx (on whom Hick bases many of his arguments), Nah recalls that implicit claims by Jesus to divinity include the following: his use of *abba* for God (citing Joachim Jeremias), his attitude towards the Mosaic Law (citing Jacob Neusner), his claim to have the authority to forgive sins (citing among others Günther Bornkamm, Walter Kasper, N.T. Wright), his reference to himself as the 'Son' (citing Ben Witherington and Raymond Brown), and his use of the title 'Son of Man' (citing W.G. Kümmel). Nah also reminds us of the surprising number of critical scholars accepting the empty tomb, as quantified for instance by Gary Habermas and Michael Licona.

It is in the evaluation of this literature that Hick's Cartesian epistemology comes to bear. Since there is for Hick, citing liberal scholars, room for legitimate disagreement about Jesus' self-understanding, one has to abandon any hopes to know enough about the historical Jesus to claim divinity

for him. But this, of course, is a much more narrow concept of knowledge than what is viewed as knowledge by most epistemologists (an exception being the late philosophy of Laurence BonJour),[1] let alone scholars outside theoretical philosophy.

Nah further evaluates Hick's view that the dogma of the divinity of Christ was an invention by the early church. He presents a survey of the literature on Christ's resurrection appearances. In particular, the controversy surrounding St Paul's claim to apostolicity (e.g. Gal 1–2) and his eagerness to claim a resurrection appearance for himself in 1 Cor 15 is best explained by the fact that the early church was all too aware that his experience of the risen Christ was of a different quality from that of the other apostles (citing William Lane Craig—and John Dominic Crossan as a sort of crown witness). Moreover, Nah emphasises (quoting Oskar Skarsaune) that the incarnational dogma is precisely a rejection of dualistic Hellenistic philosophy and therefore cannot be explained as a result of Hellenization (as von Harnack or Bultmann would have it). According to Martin Hengel, there are good reasons to view the dogma of the early church merely as a faithful rendering of the beliefs of the Jesus Movement in Hellenistic language and thought-forms, which was the natural contemporary setting for the increasingly non-Jewish church.

The sixth chapter examines Hick's arguments against several orthodox Chalcedonian christologies. Nah disagrees with Hick about the logical aspects of Morris' two-minds Christology (in which Morris distinguishes between 'merely human/divine' and 'fully human/divine' predicates). He concurs with Hick, however, that Morris' account seems psychologically implausible, as the free-will problem becomes particularly acute on such an account.

Regarding the kenotic theories of Thomasius, Davis and Weston, Nah concedes that even one of the most mature Christological theories, that of Frank Weston, does not provide a full, rational explanation of the incarnational dogma and thereby leaves some room for mystery. However, he makes a convincing case that this does not render the explanation irrelevant or worthless. In particular, Nah highlights that Weston, being an Anglican rather than a Lutheran, does not subscribe to the exhaustive Lutheran notion of incarnation according to which the second person of the Holy Trinity was entirely confined in the historical human being Jesus of Nazareth. Allowing for a manner of existence of the Son of God that is focussed on, but transcends the human Jesus, Weston helps us to understand how a self-imposed and always reversible self-limitation of the divine nature of Christ in his human nature might be conceived of.

Weston's account should qualify as one satisfactory explanation of the two-natures Christology, even though it does not answer all possible questions one might raise regarding the incarnation. To be sure, any theologian who is not staunchly apophaticist would seek as much explication of the church's teaching as is possible for human reason, including the church's teaching on the incarnation. This, however, does not mean that we should expect the

1 'The myth of knowledge', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24 (2010), 57–83.

ability of or even aim at removing all mysteries from theology. For traditional Christian theology, contending for the Faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3), even while admitting one's own cognitive incapabilities, is always preferable to rationalistic innovation.

All in all, the book provides a powerful, yet irenic defence of two-natures Christology, is well-researched and surveys various academic discourses that are of crucial importance to the integrity of our Faith. As such, it can even be used as the scholarly basis of apologetic endeavours.

Still, there are some points that might be considered if and when the author should get the chance to prepare a second edition.

First of all, Nah writes: 'Furthermore, since the church's doctrines of atonement have traditionally presupposed the doctrine of incarnation, Hick's attack on the former, if successful, would be devastating to the latter' (p. 109). Here, the logic is reversed: Of course, the church's teaching on the atonement is dependent on her doctrine of incarnation. As it has been said, 'The Nestorian Christ is the fitting Saviour of the Pelagian man.'[2]

Then, Nah writes that 'no one would argue that the doctrine of the Trinity was explicitly developed by Paul's time' (p. 184). However, if the baptismal formula of the Matthean Great Commission is an authentic saying of Jesus, it seems not very plausible that the Lord did not teach at least the fundamentals of the doctrine of the Trinity, perhaps in a form that was passed on by oral tradition and later developed into the *regula fidei*.

Furthermore, one of Hick's chief complaints about Morris' two-minds Christology—which otherwise is a beautiful explication of the orthodox Christology of St. Maximus the Confessor in terms of the society-of-mind idea from contemporary psychology—is that it appears to raise the free-will problem in a particularly sharp form (p. 196). However, the Augustinian, Thomist and Reformed solutions of the free-will problem (in terms of a weak notion of free will that is compatible with divine providence and predestination, based on the Johannine and Pauline teachings in the New Testament) are sufficient to solve this problem of Morris' Christology, too. The reason is that Nah's (and Hick's) claim that freedom is the 'power to do otherwise' is philosophically and theologically very controversial.[3]

Finally, Nah gives the impression of subsuming the kryptist (Nah: 'cryptist') position among kenotic theories (p. 197). However, at least in the Gießen–Tübingen controversy, krypsis and kenosis were rival accounts.

Nevertheless, these are relatively minor weaknesses which do not in any substantial way lessen Nah's remarkable achievement: a defence of orthodox Chalcedonian Christology in the face of one of the most eloquent and learned contemporary challenges, that of Hick's theology of pluralism.

2 Charles Gore, 'Our Lord's human example', *Church Quarterly Review*, 16 (1883), 282–313, 298; cited according to Alister E. McGrath, *Christian theology: An introduction*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell 2007), 293.

3 See, for instance, Peter van Inwagen's survey article, 'How to think about the problem of free will', *Journal of Ethics*, 12 (2008), 327–341.

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Books Reviewed

Book Reviews

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Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament

John D. Currid

Wheaton (IL), Crossway 2013
ISBN 978-1-4335-3183-5
Pb 153 pp

Reviewed by Thomas Schirrmacher, Executive Chair of the Theological Commission, World Evangelical Alliance, Martin Bucer Seminary, Bonn, Germany

Can a book of 150 pages make a difference in the field of Old Testament Studies? It can! Sometimes a groundbreaking thesis can be presented better in a short introduction, than in a massive volume. Currid's book is one of those rare examples.

Did the Old Testament writers borrow ideas from their pagan neighbours? And if they did so, was it done uncritically and unintentionally? For long it was a major criticism of the OT that it is a copycat religion. And it was a given that copying the mythology and legends of its neighbours and predecessors prove that the result are myths and legends themselves. Now a respected author of OT commentaries, an expert on Near Eastern texts, and an experienced archaeologist engages with this controversial question by carefully comparing the biblical texts with other ancient Near Eastern documents. John C. Currid is the Carl McMurray Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the author of several books and Old Testament commentaries. A PhD graduate in Syro-Palestinian archaeology (University of Chicago), he has extensive archaeological field experience from projects throughout Israel and Tunisia.

Well-researched and thoughtfully nuanced, Currid presents a clear and well argued thesis, which turns the relationship of OT and its neighbours upside down. The OT uses the so-called parallels to argue polemically against them and describe what is unique about Jewish religion and revelation.